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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: TEX-MEX MEETS EDO OGA

Unclassified but Sensitive

SIPDIS

1. (SBU) Summary: Chief Odidi of Edo State spent 18 years in the U.S., became a U.S. citizen, and made enough money to return to his native town and go into politics. While in the U.S., he absorbed American values and political culture, and now balances those ideas and aspirations against the realities of life as a "big man" in a small Nigerian town. End summary.

2. (SBU) Greeting cards in Nigeria have grown steadily larger and now rival sheets of drywall in size and weight. Chief Stanley Okpo Odidi, Chairman of the Etsako East Local Government Council and recent resident of Hemet, California, has many of these standing around his office. They congratulate him on his assumption of office two months ago and, indirectly, on the successful conclusion of his patient, extended campaign to oust his predecessor and have the governor of Edo State appoint him interim local government chairman until next year's election.

3. (SBU) Odidi moved to Texas in 1981 and worked there for six years before moving to California. He washed dishes and drove cabs before seeing an advertisement for a training course as a private investigator. He took the course and became very good at it. He lived in his car eating Tex-Mex (which he misses) for days on stakeouts, went into business with his former instructor, and became an American citizen. And he made a bundle, enough to launch himself into local Nigerian politics. He came back to Nigeria in 1999, within a month of the resumption of civilian rule, to the town of Akenabode where his father had been a chief.

4. (SBU) Chief Odidi senior, however, had been dead more than 20 years. Stanley had to remind people who he was, but enough of a light bulb went on in people's heads to help him get a foothold. Money was the key ingredient, he says. "It doesn't take much...a thousand dollars goes a long way here." He helped a lot of people out financially and was generous with little favors. And not so little: he built a "hospital" with his own funds (it may have been only a clinic) and constructed a little school. Other people in the district say he became active in the PDP. He got close to people close to the governor of Edo State and used them to get a high-profile meeting with the governor that was covered in the press.

5. (SBU) Money is essential, but it is also the key vulnerability of Nigerian local politics, Odidi says. Nigerians do not have a clear sense of the public good, and are really only interested in what politicians can do for them directly. They are in a real sense very selfish, he says; they think about themselves and their families, and the rest is of no interest. They would rather vote for a politician who gives them a small cash "dash" than one who will build clinics, schools and roads. "It is hard to get people to think about 'issues,'" says Odidi. If the voters really had their way, no money would be spent on public projects; the money for them would be split up and handed out directly to the electorate. This makes Odidi feel vulnerable. No matter how good a job he does, he can easily lose to someone who hands out a lot of money, as he did: "money wins every time."

6. (SBU) Odidi wants to do a good job. His years of exposure to American political culture were "tremendous" in many ways, he says. He can still give a blow-by-blow account of the Huffington/Boxer race in California and has adopted an American-style notion of community service. Many of his Nigerian friends who were in the U.S. were similarly influenced and have come back to try to do something for the common good. The notion of coming back to Nigeria to work for the country is not very Nigerian, he says; it isn't selfish. He is quite aware of the impossibility of introducing American style democracy here. His notion is to try to "marry the two ideas," the American and Nigerian approaches to governance and the public sphere, and move

people along slowly, helping them appreciate the benefit of public institutions.

17. (SBU) In the meantime there is the problem of getting his staff to come to work. And dealing with the 50 or so people a day who come in to the secretariat because they are hungry or need school fees or clothing. Asked what the district needs most, he says "everything." The area is "completely poor" and has nothing, but (particularly among older people) there is not necessarily a sense of being poor. People feel themselves to be "ordinary;" they have farmed all their lives, have no standard of comparison with people elsewhere, and are accustomed to making do with little. Young people, however, are aware of the outside world and are conscious of their poverty. They are angry and frustrated by it but have no idea what to do. They don't believe education will lead anywhere as there are no local role models who have done well through education. They may work as motor bike drivers, earning perhaps 300 naira a week if they rent the bike and 1000 naira if they own it. "But don't think they are going to revolt," he said. "People here are quite docile."

18. (SBU) What youth don't want to do is farm. They look down on it as old fashioned, demeaning, hard work. Within the borders of the district is a well-equipped agricultural school supported by the Leventis Foundation offering free education, room and board to promising young farmers for year-long courses. Not one student from the district is there, but Odidi knows that better farming is the community's only way out and is trying to help farmers modernize. This area is Nigeria's agricultural heartland. The district supported Nigeria's largest farm until it collapsed with the removal of tariffs on imported grains. Odidi has thus far organized 40 farmers into loose cooperatives to benefit from the tractor the district is about to buy. He is also looking into other ways to improve agriculture: seeds, new crops, etc. The transport of produce to market, however, is an unresolved problem, as the difference between local and urban prices demonstrates. A box of tomatoes selling for 4000 naira in Lagos costs 100 naira locally, Odidi said. Much local produce just rots.

19. (SBU) Comment: "There are lots of people like me," says Odidi, "younger, well-travelled Nigerians who have come back to help change things." At his suggestion we visited one of his fellow district chairmen (in Auchi) and found someone considerably less comfortable in English but who nevertheless had run a modern business and had visited the US for trade fairs and training seminars. What we find interesting in Odidi is the calculated blend of old and new: the cronyism, the unabashed use of money, ancient ties and chiefly traditional authority by someone who knows why Boxer beat Huffington and who wants to move his community into a future it doesn't know exists. Odidi has followed in his father's footsteps as a Nigerian "big man," but he frets about his next election opponent and waits impatiently for someone to bring him his next cache of tortillas and refried beans.

GREGOIRE